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(54) **Polymer waveguide switch and method**

(57) An optical switch having a straight waveguide core with a lateral waveguide core extending therefrom. A region of polymer material is disposed in the straight waveguide core to deflect optical waves from the first waveguide core into the lateral waveguide core depending on the relative indexes of refraction between the first

waveguide core and the polymer material. The temperature of the polymer material is adjusted, thereby adjusting the index of refraction of the polymer material so as to cause the deflection in a switched state, and to allow light radiation to pass through the polymer material in an un-switched state.

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Description

Cross-Reference To Related Applications

[0001] Not applicable.

Statement Regarding Federally Sponsored Research Or Development

[0002] Not Applicable.

Field Of The Invention

[0003] The present invention relates to the field of optical waveguide technology and, more particularly, to the field of optical switches.

Background Of The Invention

[0004] Current communications networks throughout the world have embraced the use of optical fiber waveguide technology to provide a conduit of transmission components for voice, video, and data signals. Optical networks offer far greater bandwidth and reliability than do conventional electronic networks. As a consequence, current research efforts have been directed to expanding the capabilities of optical waveguide technology at reduced cost to aid in the acceleration of the conversion of the present electrical communications networks to optical communications networks.

[0005] Optical communications networks contain many different components. These include, but are not limited to, optical fiber cable, switches, attenuators, couplers, and many more such devices. Typically, these devices are comprised of a core surrounded by a cladding material. Both the materials used for the core and the cladding include silica or doped silica as well as many other similar materials. These materials are employed because they have a desirable index of refraction and as well as other properties which facilitate their use.

[0006] Even though current materials used in constructing the core and the cladding have many beneficial properties, it can be desirable to manipulate the properties of such materials to control the direction of the propagation of laser radiation through a network of waveguides.

[0007] Specifically, it is often desirable to switch the propagation of a light wave from one waveguide to another. Consequently, there is a need for optical structures that facilitate the switching of optical signals between optical waveguides.

Brief Summary Of The Invention

[0008] The present invention entails the use of polymer materials in optical switching. In one embodiment, an optical switch is created having a straight waveguide core and a lateral waveguide core which extends from

the side of the straight waveguide core. The straight waveguide core includes a region of polymer material which forms an optical deflection wall. The polymer material has an index of refraction which varies with temperature. When the switch is in an un-switched state, the temperature of the polymer material is set so that the index of refraction is higher than or equal to the index of refraction of the straight waveguide core. In this un-switched state, optical waves propagate along the axis of the straight waveguide core through the region of polymer material and exit from the straight waveguide core. When in a switched state, the temperature of the polymer material is set so that the polymer index of refraction is lower than the index of refraction of the straight waveguide core. In this switched state, optical waves are deflected into the lateral waveguide core by the optical deflection wall and exit from the lateral waveguide core.

[0009] In another embodiment, the present invention may also be viewed as an optical switching method which begins with the step of optically coupling a lateral waveguide core to a straight waveguide core where the lateral waveguide core extends from the straight waveguide core. Next, a polymer region is positioned in the straight waveguide core creating an optical deflection wall to deflect an optical wave into the lateral waveguide core. Next, an optical wave is transmitted into the straight waveguide core. The step of controlling the temperature of the polymer region is performed, thereby controlling the index of refraction of the polymer region. Finally, the steps of propagating the optical wave through the polymer region when in an un-switched state, and deflecting the optical wave into the lateral waveguide core when in a switched state are performed.

[0010] Other features and advantages of the present invention will become apparent to one with skill in the art upon examination of the following drawings and detailed description. It is intended that all such additional features and advantages be included herein within the scope of the present invention, as defined by the claims.

Brief Description Of The Drawings

[0011] The invention can be better understood with reference to the following drawings. The components in the drawings are not necessarily to scale, emphasis instead being placed upon clearly illustrating the principles of the present invention. In the drawings, like reference numerals designate corresponding parts throughout the several views.

Fig. 1 shows a perspective view of an optical switch according to an embodiment of the present invention;

Fig. 2 shows a top view of the optical switch of **Fig. 1**;

Fig. 3 shows a sectional view of the optical switch of **Fig. 2**;

Fig. 4 shows a graph of the index of refraction of a polymer material as a function of temperature;

Fig. 5 shows a perspective view of an optical switch according to another embodiment of the present invention;

Fig. 6 shows a top view of the optical switch of **Fig. 5**; and

Fig. 7 shows a sectional view of the optical switch of **Fig. 6**.

Detailed Description Of The Preferred Embodiment

[0012] Turning to **Fig. 1**, shown is an optical switch **100** according to an embodiment of the present invention. The optical switch **100** comprises a straight waveguide core **105** and a lateral waveguide core **110**. Both the straight and lateral waveguide cores **105** and **110** share a common waveguide segment **115** with the lateral waveguide core **110** extending from the side of the straight waveguide core **105**. Positioned in the straight waveguide core **105** is a polymer region **120** which forms an optical deflection wall **125**. The straight and lateral waveguide cores **105** and **110** are formed on a substrate **130**. The surface areas of the straight and lateral waveguide cores **105** and **110** that are not in contact with the substrate **130** are surrounded with a cladding material **135**.

[0013] Referring to **Fig. 2**, shown is a top view of the optical switch **100**. According to this view, the lateral waveguide core **110** includes a first segment **140** which originates at the common waveguide segment **115** and extends from the straight waveguide core **105** at a first angle ϕ . Thereafter, the lateral waveguide core **110** extends from the first segment **140** at a second angle α with respect to the straight waveguide core **105**. The first angle ϕ is preferably 1.8 degrees for best results, however, other angles may be used. The second angle α is preferably equal to 2ϕ . This means that the change in direction between the common waveguide segment **115** and the first segment **140** is equal to the change of direction between the first segment **140** and the remainder of the lateral waveguide core **110**. This common change in direction is minimized in order to minimize the loss of energy at each direction change. Also, the optical deflection wall **125** is clearly defined as bordering the first segment **140**. The straight and lateral waveguide cores **105** and **110** are preferably 5 microns wide although greater or lesser widths may be employed.

[0014] The lateral waveguide core **110** includes an index of refraction of n_{WC} . The straight waveguide core **105** also has an index of refraction n_{WC} except for the polymer region **120** which has an index of refraction n_P .

A section line **145** is drawn across the center of the optical switch **100**.

[0015] Turning then, to **Fig. 3**, shown is a sectional view of the optical switch **100** taken along the section line **145** (**Fig. 2**). The first segment **140** of the lateral waveguide core **110** is shown with an index of refraction n_{WC} . Also, the polymer region **120** includes an index of refraction n_P . **Fig. 3** shows the substrate **130** with an index of refraction n_S and the cladding material **135** with an index of refraction n_{CL} .

[0016] The cladding material **135** and the substrate **130** are preferably created using silica or other material with similar properties and the materials used in the straight and lateral waveguide cores **105** and **110** (**Fig. 2**) is preferably doped silica or other material with similar properties.

[0017] The index of refraction n_{WC} is specified at an identifiable value depending upon the material employed to create the straight and lateral waveguide cores **105** and **110**. If doped silica is employed, then the index of refraction n_{WC} may be approximately 1.4675, for example. Where silica is used for the substrate **130** and the cladding material **135**, the indexes of refraction n_S and n_{CL} may be approximately 1.46, for example. The index of refraction n_P of the polymer region **120** varies with the temperature of the polymer region **120**. This range may be, for example, approximately 1.46 to 1.473.

[0018] Turning back to **Fig. 2**, the operation of the optical switch **100** is explained. An optical wave **150** enters the optical switch **100** at input port A. The optical wave **150** exits the optical switch **100** through either output port B or C depending upon the temperature and corresponding index of refraction of the polymer region **120**. In an un-switched state, the optical wave **150** exits the optical switch **100** through output port B. In a switched state, the optical wave **150** exits the optical switch **100** through output port C.

[0019] The optical switch **100** is placed in the un-switched state by changing the temperature of the polymer region **120**, for example, by cooling so that the index of refraction n_P is greater than the index of refraction n_{WC} , or approximately 1.473 in the above example. The actual temperature of the polymer region **120** that results in an index of refraction n_P greater than the index of refraction n_{WC} depends upon the type of polymer material chosen as seen in **Fig. 4**. When the index of refraction n_P is greater than the index of refraction n_{WC} , then the optical wave **150** proceeds straight through the polymer region **120** and the straight waveguide core **105** exiting through output port B.

[0020] The optical switch **100** is placed in the switched state by changing the temperature of the polymer region **120**, for example, by heating so that the index of refraction n_P is less than the index of refraction n_{WC} , or approximately 1.46 in the above example. The actual temperature of the polymer region **120** that results in an index of refraction n_P less than the index of refraction n_{WC}

depends upon the type of polymer material chosen. When the index of refraction n_P is less than the index of refraction n_{WC} , then the optical wave **150** is deflected by the optical deflection wall **125** of the polymer region **120** into the lateral waveguide core **110**. The optical waveguide **150** proceeds through the lateral waveguide core **110** exiting through output port **C**.

[0021] Referring to **Fig. 4**, shown is a graph depicting the index of refraction n_P as a function of temperature in degrees Celsius of three example polymers which may be used according to the embodiments of the present invention. Line **280** depicts the index of refraction of F/CA polymer which has a thermal coefficient of -0.0002C^{-1} , line **285** depicts the index of refraction of D-PMMA/D-FA polymer which has a thermal coefficient of -0.001C^{-1} , and line **290** depicts the index of refraction of FA polymer which has a thermal coefficient of -0.003C^{-1} . Note that the starting point at $n=1.46$ and Temperature = -20°C were chosen arbitrarily. Ultimately, the indexes of refraction of various polymers depend upon their composition and can vary over a relatively wide range as a function of temperature.

[0022] Referring next, to **Fig. 5**, shown is an optical switch **200** according to yet another embodiment of the present invention. The optical switch **200** is similar in several respects to the optical switch **100** (**Fig. 1**) in that it includes a straight waveguide core **205** and a lateral waveguide core **210**. The straight and lateral waveguide cores originate at a common waveguide segment **215**. The straight waveguide core **205** includes an extended polymer region **220** which forms a curved deflection wall **225**. The straight and lateral waveguide cores **205** and **210** are formed on a substrate **230** and are surrounded by a cladding material **235**.

[0023] Referring to **Fig. 6**, shown is a top view of the optical switch **200**. The lateral waveguide core **210** includes a curved segment **240** which originates as a tangent that is parallel with the straight waveguide core **205** and extends from the straight waveguide core **205** forming a tangent that is at an angle s with respect to the straight waveguide core **205**. The angle s may be 5 degrees to facilitate deflection of a light wave as will be discussed. Also, the curved deflection wall **225** is clearly defined as bordering the first segment **240**. The straight and lateral waveguide cores **205** and **210** are preferably 5 microns wide although greater or lesser widths may be employed. In the optical switch **200**, the extended polymer region **220** extends beyond the separation point **245**. Also, the extended polymer region **220** also includes an extended width **250** that falls beyond the width of the straight waveguide core **205**.

[0024] The optical switch **200** includes an input port **A** and output ports **B** and **C**. The straight and lateral waveguide cores **205** and **210** have an index of refraction of n_{WC} and the extended polymer region **220** has an index of refraction n_P similar to the optical switch **100** (**Fig. 1**) as shown. A section line **255** is drawn across the center of the optical switch **200**.

[0025] Turning then, to **Fig. 7**, shown is a sectional view of the optical switch **200** taken from the section line **255** (**Fig. 6**). The lateral waveguide core **210** is shown with an index of refraction n_{WC} . Also, the extended polymer region **220** includes an index of refraction n_P . **Fig. 7** shows the substrate **230** with an index of refraction n_S and the cladding material **235** with an index of refraction n_{CL} .

[0026] The cladding material **235** and the substrate **230** are preferably created using silica or other material with similar properties and the materials used in the straight and lateral waveguide cores **205** and **210** (**Fig. 5**) is preferably doped silica or other material with similar properties.

[0027] The index of refraction n_{WC} is specified at an identifiable value depending upon the material employed to create the straight and lateral waveguide cores **205** and **210**. If doped silica is employed, then the index of refraction n_{WC} may be approximately 1.4675, for example. Where silica is used for the substrate **230** and the cladding material **235**, the indexes of refraction n_S and n_{CL} may be approximately 1.46, for example. The index of refraction n_P of the extended polymer region **220** varies with the temperature of the extended polymer region **220**. This range may be, for example, approximately 1.46 to 1.473.

[0028] Turning back to **Fig. 5**, the operation of the optical switch **200** is explained. An optical wave **260** enters the optical switch **200** at input port **A**. The optical wave **260** exits the optical switch **200** through either output port **B** or **C** depending upon the temperature and corresponding index of refraction n_P of the extended polymer region **220**. In an un-switched state, the optical wave **260** exits the optical switch **200** through output port **B**. In a switched state, the optical wave **260** exits the optical switch **200** through output port **C**.

[0029] The optical switch **200** is placed in the un-switched state by changing the temperature of the extended polymer region **220**, for example, by cooling so that the index of refraction n_P is greater than the index of refraction n_{WC} , or approximately 1.473 in the above example. The actual temperature of the extended polymer region **220** that results in an index of refraction n_P greater than the index refraction n_{WC} depends upon the type of polymer material chosen as seen in **Fig. 4**. When the index of refraction n_P is greater than the index of refraction n_{WC} , then the optical wave **260** proceeds straight through the extended polymer region **220** and the straight waveguide core **205** exiting through output port **B**.

[0030] The optical switch **200** is placed in the switched state by changing the temperature of the extended polymer region **220**, for example, by heating so that the index of refraction n_P is less than the index of refraction n_{WC} , or approximately 1.46 in the above example. The actual temperature of the extended polymer region **220** that results in an index of refraction n_P less than the index refraction n_{WC} depends upon the type of polymer

material chosen as seen in **Fig. 4**. When the index of refraction n_P is less than the index of refraction n_{WC} , then the optical wave **260** is deflected off of the curved deflection wall **225** of the extended polymer region **220** into the lateral waveguide core **110**. The optical wave **260** proceeds through the lateral waveguide core **110** exiting through output port **C**.

[0031] The extension of the extended polymer region **220** beyond the separation point **245** helps reduce coupling between the separating straight and lateral waveguides **205** and **210**. The extended width **250** of the extended polymer region **220** is beneficial for the performance of the optical switch **200** when in an un-switched state.

[0032] Many variations and modifications may be made to the various embodiments of the present invention without departing substantially from the spirit and principles of the invention. All such modifications and variations are intended to be included herein within the scope of the present invention, as defined by the following claims.

Claims

1. An optical switching device, comprising:

a straight waveguide core;

a lateral waveguide core extending from the straight waveguide core; and

a polymer region disposed in the straight waveguide core, the polymer region having an index of refraction that varies with temperature, the polymer region forming an optical deflection wall.

2. The optical switching device of claim 1, further comprising:

a switched state where the index of refraction of the polymer region is less than the index of refraction of the straight waveguide core, wherein the deflection wall deflects a light wave into the lateral waveguide core; and

an un-switched state where the index of refraction of the polymer region is greater than the index of refraction of the straight waveguide core, wherein a light wave propagates through the polymer region and along the straight waveguide core.

3. The optical switching device of claim 1, wherein the lateral waveguide core extends from the straight waveguide core in a first segment disposed at a first angle with respect to the straight waveguide core.

4. The optical switching device of claim 1, wherein the lateral waveguide core extends from the straight waveguide core in a curved segment.

5. The optical switching device of claim 1, wherein the lateral waveguide core includes at least one second segment coupled to the first segment, the second segment being disposed at a second angle with respect to the straight waveguide core.

6. The optical switching device of claim 1, wherein the polymer region width extends beyond the straight waveguide core.

7. The optical switching device of claim 1, wherein the polymer region extends beyond a point where the straight and lateral waveguide cores separate.

8. A method for optical switching, comprising the steps of:

optically coupling a lateral waveguide core to a straight waveguide core, the lateral waveguide core extending from the straight waveguide core;

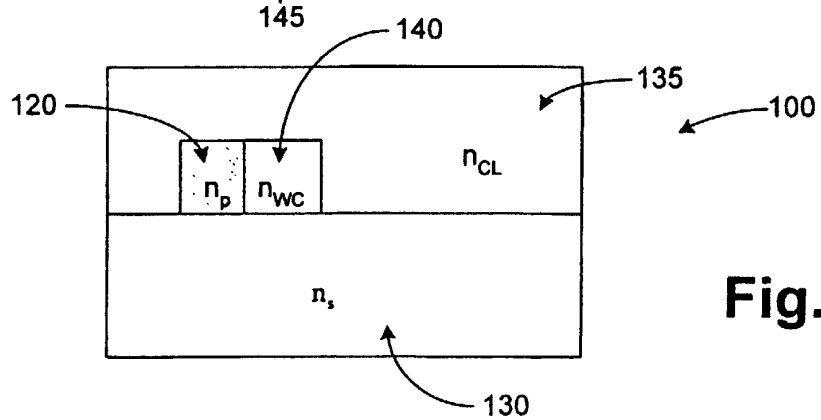
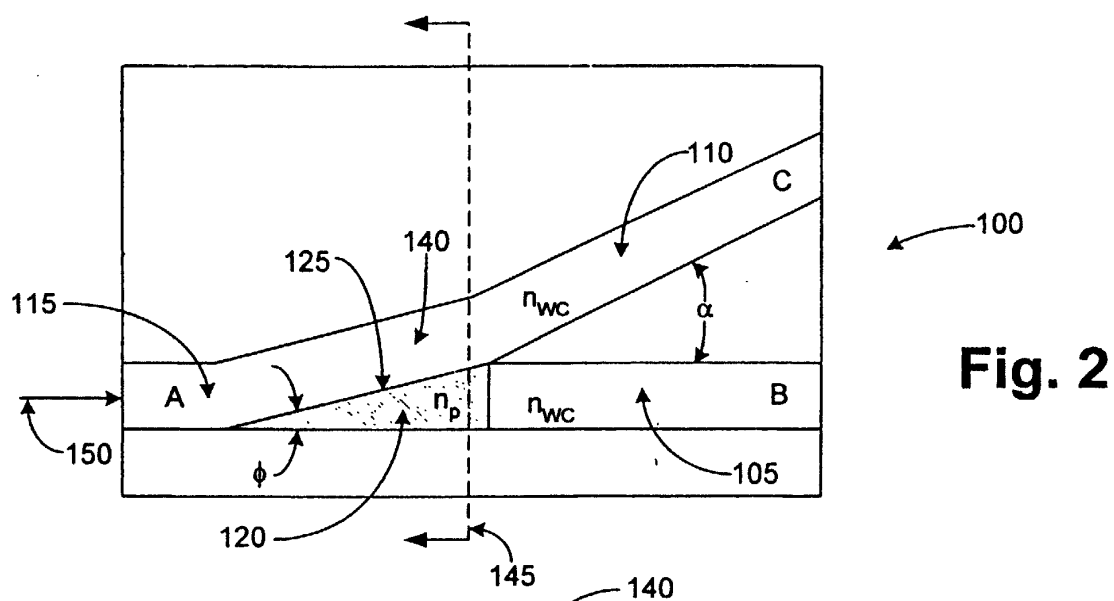
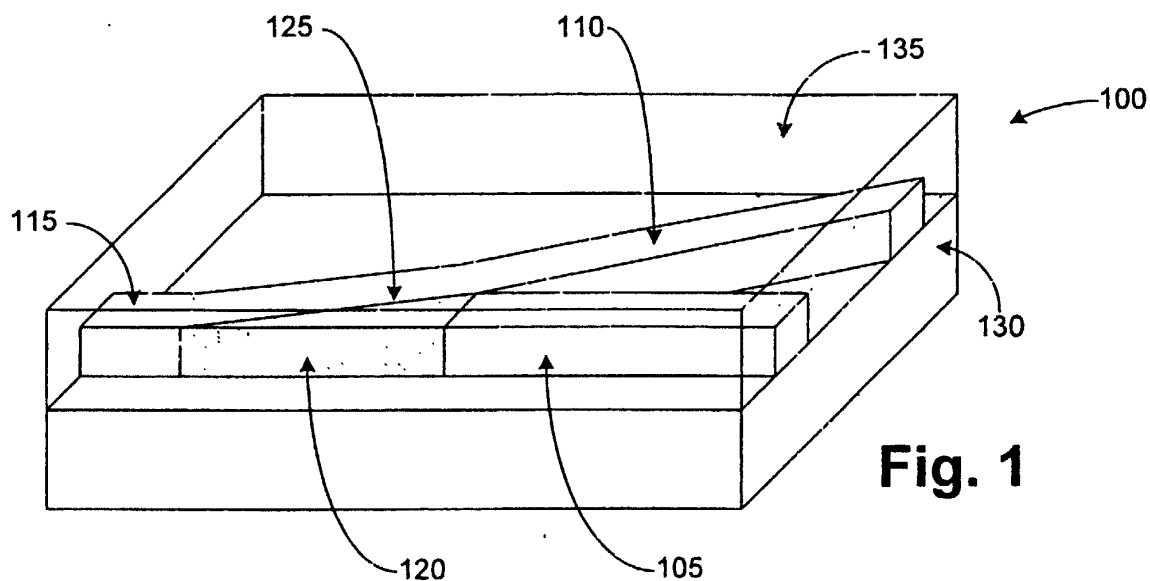
positioning a polymer region in the straight waveguide core, the polymer region creating an optical deflection wall to deflect an optical wave into the lateral waveguide core;

transmitting an optical wave into the straight waveguide core;

controlling the temperature of the polymer region, thereby controlling the index of refraction of the polymer region;

propagating the optical wave through the polymer region when in an un-switched state; and

deflecting the optical wave into the lateral waveguide core when in a switched state.



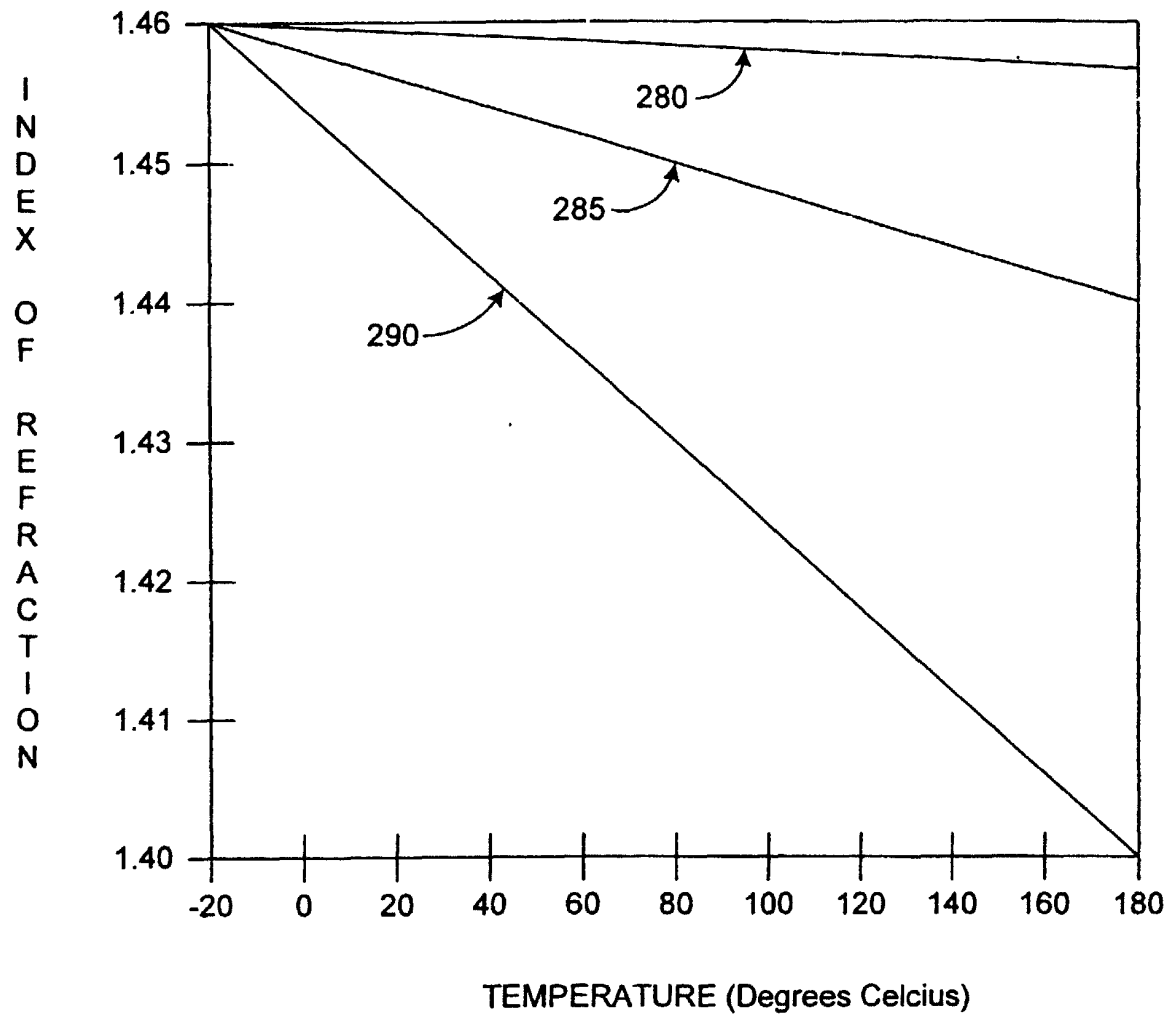


Fig. 4

